

*Food Friends – Partnering with other Federal Food Assistance Programs to Reach Colorado's Preschoolers.*

Jennifer Anderson, Ph.D., R.D., Director Colorado Nutrition Network, Laura Bellows, M.P.H., R.D., Youth Initiatives Coordinator, and Leslie Beckstrom, M.S., R.D. Network Coordinator, Colorado State University

*Food Friends – Making New Foods Fun for Kids™* is a social marketing program designed to promote healthy habits and skill building among at-risk preschool-aged children. This program utilizes a nutrition education program that has been extensively evaluated to ensure changes in eating behavior are attained. *Food Friends* promotes the importance of trying new foods in an effort to increase the variety of foods consumed among these children while also reinforcing school readiness skills, including literacy skills. The program focuses on the children and secondary influencers, such as Head Start, preschool, and family daycare staff and teachers, as well as parents. In program year 2003, 2777 children were reached through *Food Friends* in 142 classrooms, resulting in 65,208 direct contacts. Furthermore, 855 children were evaluated using the Tasting Party tool, 88% of the children tasted all four of the new foods presented to them, while 95% tried at least two of the four new foods. *Food Friends* anticipates reaching 3500 children in 225 Colorado classrooms during the 2004 program year. *Food Friends* was initially designed to be implemented in the Head Start and preschool center environment. Due to the success of the program's tested ability to increase children's willingness to try new foods, partnering agencies of the Colorado Nutrition Network (CNN) are eager to expand into other settings as well as do more outreach and education of food assistance programs through the *Food Friends* program. Partnerships with other federal programs have been vital to the success of the Food Friends program. Colorado's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) has been working closely with the Network to design a Food Friends model for family daycare homes. Additionally, CACFP supports the program through food reimbursement and by having their sponsors promote the program to nutrition coordinators at Head Start and preschool centers. The CNN provides materials for implementation to Head Start grantees; WIC provides their educators with Food Friends parent educational materials so that consistent messages about offering new foods can be reinforced to those parents of preschool-aged children who also receive WIC services; and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Physical Activity and Nutrition coalition's Early Childhood Task Force plans to assist in the development collateral pieces that reinforce the '*Family Fun with New Foods*' parent/caregiver message in various community settings. This model acknowledges the importance of community partnerships in reaching the low-income preschool audience. Food Friends is funded in part by the USDA Food Stamp Program through the Colorado Department of Human Services, Caring for Colorado Foundation, The Colorado Trust, General Mills Foundation, Colorado's Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Team Nutrition through the Colorado Department of Education.